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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000222

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TAGS: PREL PHUM PGOV ASEC AMGT MARR SCUL FJ
SUBJECT: EAP DAS DAVIES VISIT TO FIJI DRAWS SHARP REACTION

REF: A. SUVA 207
1B. STATE 48129
1C. SUVA 212
1D. SUVA 213

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) During an April 11-12 visit to Suva, EAP DAS Glyn Davies met with a cross-section of Fiji opinion leaders, including interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau and interim Finance Minister Chaudhry. Interim PM Bainimarama refused a meeting. Nailatikau and Chaudhry, both heading shortly to Brussels for crucial talks with the EU, acknowledged Fiji needs to return to democracy, but they used "process" arguments to attempt to counter Davies's statements of USG "principles" for why the pace needs to be rapid. Davies pushed hard for resolution of the "NEC visas" issue and a recent "request" for the embassy to remove vehicle barriers. In other meetings, Davies heard the perspectives of human-rights activists, former Qarase officials, and others. Activists complimented USG policy toward Fiji, including our visa ban. The Reserve Bank Governor confirmed Fiji's economic situation is dire. Some interlocutors reported strains within the military; a Bainimarama confidant denied that. DAS Davies used three media events to convey USG views publicly. He also consulted with leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Australian and New Zealand High Commissioners. The visit was extremely useful for U.S. interests in Fiji. End summary.

Hearing a wide range of views; PM declines meeting

12. (U) EAP DAS Davies had a busy stay in Fiji April 11-12. He met with interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau and interim Finance Minister Chaudhry. We sought a meeting for him with interim Prime Minister Bainimarama, who declined. Davies spoke by phone with Prime Minister Qarase, exiled in Lau; had lunch with Foreign Minister Tavola; and met with many others, including representatives of the human-rights community. Davies gave an interview to Islands Business magazine, held a media conference, and was the guest on Fiji TV's Close-Up program, the most watched show in Fiji after the evening news.

Explaining the U.S. perspective

13. (C) In all venues, DAS Davies highlighted USG views about how Fiji can move forward from last December's coup, emphasizing that we are on the same page with the Pacific Island Forum in seeing the clear need for the military quickly to withdraw to the barracks, end the state of

emergency, halt human-rights violations, remove itself from politics, and permit free and fair elections within 18 months. The interim ministers, who were to leave shortly for Brussels to participate in crucial talks with the EU about post-coup assistance, acknowledged the need for Fiji to return to democratic rule, but they stressed a step by step approach. They stuck to a 36-month election time frame, starting the clock from April 18 when the EU consultations begin. Nailatikau seemed to signal some flexibility, though he said flatly, "It will not be 18 months." DAS Davies noted that the U.S. is talking "principle" while the interim administration is talking "process," and is thereby delaying the return of democracy.

Pressing to resolve NEC and street-barrier issues

¶4. (C) In the meetings with interim ministers, DAS Davies pushed hard on the NEC visa issue and the recent "request" from Bainimarama for the embassy to remove security barriers that provide the chancery its only set-back from a central city street. Davies made clear the critical security need for the barriers, and he laid out the economic benefits of the NEC project (F\$30 million in local expenditures; 12,000 man months of work, F\$3 million in tax revenues). Nailatikau said the NEC issue has been referred to the Attorney General.

We flagged the need for a speedy decision. On hearing the economic benefits, Chaudhry offered his support on the NEC visa issue, while acknowledging the matter is not in his portfolio. Nailatikau asked for a formal diplomatic note re the barriers. That was subsequently provided (refs A and B).

Chaudhry noted an interim government plan to announce a national council of prominent persons from all sides to establish a charter for Fiji's future. Nailatikau had raised

SUVA 00000222 002 OF 003

that concept, vaguely, at the Pacific Forum Ministerial. Chaudhry suggested it will be part of the Fiji pitch in Brussels.

Gathering perspectives on human rights...

¶5. (C) In the other meetings, DAS Davies received a variety of views of the coup and subsequent events. Former Qarase-government officials and civil-society representatives were very appreciative of the strong stance the U.S. has taken with Fiji. They encouraged us to keep the pressure on the military and the interim government, including with visa sanctions which, they said, clearly are having a salutary effect. Three human-rights activists noted firm evidence that senior RFMF officers have led the intimidation of human-rights leaders and the media. Virisila Buadromo of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement identified Land Forces Commander Col. Pita Driti as leading the group that abused her early Christmas morning. The activists named 3FIR Commander LtCol. Ratu Tevita Mara and Major (now LtCol.) Qiliho as others who clearly have led such abuses. (All are on the U.S. visa ban list.) The activists said abuses continue, though military intimidation has reduced media attention. Activists were very skeptical of the "Public Charter" concept, predicting that it will be an orchestrated attempt to give the interim regime unwarranted legitimacy. Former VP Madraiwiwi was asked to participate, but he has declined to do so.

...and on economic and military strains

¶6. (C) The Governor of Fiji's Reserve Bank confirmed the negative impact of the coup. He said the economic situation is dire, and restoring democracy is crucial to economic welfare. He confirmed that an IMF visit later this month will analyze Fiji's difficult current-account situation. Several interlocutors suggested there are major strains within the military, which did not expect the post-coup period to be so difficult. However, Paul Manuela, a retired military commander who remains a Bainimarama advisor, denied any troubles in the barracks. DAS Davies dined with the Australia and New Zealand High Commissioners, an opportunity

to confirm the three nations' policies are closely aligned on Fiji.

Working the media

¶7. (U) In media events, DAS Davies had a one-on-one interview with Laisa Taga, editor in chief of Islands Business magazine. Ms. Taga has been selected for PD's "Year of the Pacific" journalism tour. Davies held a media conference that attracted TV, radio, and print reporters from all major outlets. Subsequent coverage was extensive, including the front-page lead headline in the Fiji Post. FijiTV's "Close Up" program taped a half-hour interview with Davies that ran Sunday evening. "Close Up" is widely watched. A respected media advisor in Suva phoned today to compliment Davies's approach: offering an explanation of Fiji's issues and U.S. views; making clear the problem was the coup, not the U.S. response; plus expressing willingness to help Fiji move forward, if the interim government will only make the right moves.

Consulting with PIF re Fiji issues and the PICL

¶8. (C) DAS Davies had lunch with Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Greg Urwin and other PIF officials. Urwin

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reported on the PIF/interim-government working group established to follow-up on the recent Vanuatu ministerial re Fiji. The group has three months to report back to PIF ministers. Member-country ambassadors in Suva make up the PIF side. The PM's PermSec Parmesh Chand and MFA Advisor Isikeli Mataitoga lead the Fiji side. (Note: in a meeting late last week, the working group agreed to terms of reference and to see about hiring an elections expert to advise on the Fiji road map.) Urwin told us he is very confident the expert will advise an election can take place within 18 months. Davies and Urwin also discussed the upcoming Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL). Urwin confirmed he is happy to lead the subsequent core-group session on regional issues.

Comment

¶9. (C) The visit of DAS Davies came at an "interesting" time in Fiji. Commodore Bainimarama is feeling the strain of

SUVA 00000222 003 OF 003

governing a country that doesn't salute like an army. He is frustrated that the international community, in particular Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S., are not accepting his interim government as legitimate and have imposed painful sanctions. His instinct is to lunge, thus the directive last week for the embassy to remove its vehicle barriers on the street (ref C) and the renewal of the military's claim that U.S., Aussie, and UK chiefs of mission attempted to incite mutiny last November (ref D). DAS Davies' comment at the media conference that Bainimarama's unwillingness to meet was a "missed opportunity" brought another attack. Per ref D, Bainimarama said he only meets with friendly countries these days, and we are not one of them. One might have thought the coming meeting with the EU, which clearly has Bainimarama's attention, might have tempered his approach, but it clearly has not. We presume he is using the "foreign power" bogeyman, yet again, to attempt to solidify his army support and divert domestic attention from the interim regime's poor performance.

¶10. (C) We believe the Davies visit more than achieved its aims, despite Bainimarama's petulance. Davies forcefully delivered the U.S. vision re Fiji to one and all. The media coverage was extensive. Those in Fiji, and there are many, who aspire to a rapid return to democracy, received a lift. Those who see advantage in using "process" issues to delay elections were reminded that the U.S. stands firmly with Fiji's island neighbors for rapid progress.

¶11. (U) See septel regarding the Tonga portion of DAS Davies' trip. DAS Davies has cleared this message.

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